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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000467

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: IRAN'S WOMEN'S MOVEMENT FACES EASIER, HARDER TIME AFTER JUNE ELECTION

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyre, Director, Iran Regional Presence Office, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Two active members of Iran's leading women's rights organization told IRPO the disputed presidential election has both dramatically increased public receptivity to the One Million Signature Campaign's calls for gender equality, and simultaneously constrained its ability to train and mobilize the surge of new volunteers amidst sharply increased repression of civil society groups and activists. Ironically, they noted that while convincing people to sign the Campaign's petition is much easier than before the election that galvanized much of the population, faith in the utility of the near-term goal of the organization - to deliver one million signatures to the Majlis demanding the revision of laws that discriminate against women - has evaporated. "People think the Majlis is a joke," one of the activists observed, "they say if the government can steal the entire election, then what good is a piece of paper." Nevertheless, the women view the increased political engagement of the population as beneficial to their movement, and asserted that their goal is simply to bring Iranian laws in line with prevailing social norms. Just as the election demonstrated that most Iranians are politically moderate, they argued, the hardline government represents a minority view on women's issues among Iranians. (NOTE: The two women are transiting Dubai en route to New York City, where they will accept an award from Glamour Magazine on behalf of the One Million Signatures Campaign. A third colleague, who was arrested several months ago while collecting signatures and detained for two weeks, decided against participating after receiving a warning from the Intelligence Ministry. END NOTE) END SUMMARY.

Campaigns and Election Dispute Bring Surge of Support

12. (C) The activists described the final weeks of the campaign period in the run-up to the June 12 presidential election as a bonanza for their efforts. As momentum grew, women's issues came to the forefront of the public debate. The women said that though most "social activists" (themselves included) actively supported former Majlis Speaker Mehdi Karrubi's candidacy because he offered "detailed plans" for reforming discriminatory laws, Zahra Rahnavard's high-profile role in her husband Mir Hossein Mousavi's campaign generated huge enthusiasm among women voters as well. During the large campaign rallies for the two reformist candidates, One Million Signature Campaign workers gathered "tens of thousands" of new signatures, and participants eagerly took their hand-outs and held up placards demanding

gender equality.

13. (C) The two women said that in the aftermath of the election, widespread enthusiasm turned to anger as many formerly politically disengaged Iranians protested Ahmadinejad's implausible landslide reelection. Whereas before the election, many potentially sympathetic people "kept their distance" from the Campaign out of apathy or fear, disgust with the government's conduct since June has led to unprecedented volunteerism, online requests for information, and willingness to sign the organization's petition. At the same time, however, the government reacted to post-election unrest by cracking down on civil society groups and activists, including Campaign members. As a result, since the election a backlog of willing volunteers has grown because the Campaign has only been able to hold one workshop to train new recruits out of fear the event would be targeted by security agents. Similarly, the women report that collecting signatures for the Campaign's centerpiece deliverable - a petition demanding revisions to laws that discriminate against women - is "easier than ever" at exactly the same moment people have lost all faith in the government's willingness to redress public concerns.

#### Campaign's Openness Leaves Members Vulnerable

14. (C) The women described the One Million Signature Campaign as a non-hierarchical, intentionally open organization that relies mostly on personal interaction to educate and collect signatures. Volunteers deploy to public areas such as parks and shopping malls to educate willing passers-by and collect petition signatures. They are often arrested for their activities, and several Campaign members have been sentenced to prison while others have been prevented from traveling. The two

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activists described the April arrest of three colleagues while they were collecting signatures from hikers and picnickers on a mountain outside of Tehran. The three women were held two weeks in a detention facility then released without charges. However, they now periodically receive calls - presumably from the Intelligence Ministry - 'reminding' them to watch their step. The post-election crack-down on political and civil society activists has led the Campaign to curtail its organized meetings, though not its outreach activities and signature collection by trained volunteers. For example, the only workshop to train new volunteers since the election was raided by security agents, leading the Campaign to suspend the workshops despite a surge in interest. In response, the Campaign is now conducting more of its work on-line, despite IRIG efforts to bring down their website - according to the two activists, the Campaign's website has been blocked 21 times and was subject to denial of service attacks over the summer.

15. (C) COMMENT: In many ways, the women's movement's post-election operating environment provides a window on the current circumstances of civil society in Iran. Though fury over the government's ham-fisted manipulation of the election has prodded the once-silent majority of moderate Iranians to agitate against the regime, as yet this discontent has failed to translate into actions or even a discernable strategy. The One Million Signatures Campaign, though likely representative of the social norms held by middle class, urban Iranians, are now less able than before the election to extend their reach beyond those with Internet access. END COMMENT.

EYRE